MLSC 624
Advanced Creative Nonfiction
Course Procedures and Syllabus
Winter 2013

Meeting time and location: January 9 – March 20 - 6:15 – 9:30 PM Wednesdays with one additional class scheduled during Spring Break (February 27) – Location TBA

Instructor:	**Deborah J. Barrett, Ph.D.,** **Professor of the Practice of Writing and Communication**
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E-mail:	**barrett@rice.edu (best way to reach me).** If you do not hear back from me in 24 hours, then please send me a text or leave a message on my cell phone, since it means your e-mail did not get to me for some reason (often pushed into SPAM, which I only check weekly).
Office hours:	**3:00 – 5:30 MW; others by appointment through e-mail.**

Introduction

This course offers students an opportunity to continue to practice writing creative nonfiction in a guided workshop format. The primary emphasis in the course will be on the professor and students reading and providing constructive feedback on the students' creative nonfiction writings. In addition, the students will read further examples of various types of creative nonfiction writing and complete writing exercises designed to allow them to work on the voice, structure, and technique of their writing.

Throughout the semester, students will turn in short writing exercises and essays, culminating in either perfecting an essay to submit for possible publication or drafting a proposal for a book-length publication.

This course is designed for students who have completed MLSC 617 – Creative Nonfiction. Other MLS students who have completed a creative nonfiction writing course elsewhere or who have extensive other writing workshop experience may petition the instructor for enrollment.

Course Objectives

The course objectives are to help students do the following:

- Develop further their experience and understanding of the rich and diverse creative nonfiction genre
- Refine their own voices and techniques commonly used in creative nonfiction in their own writing
- Improve their own writing style so that they express themselves gracefully and effectively
- Determine their space in the broad creative nonfiction genre and further explore the opportunities for continuing to develop their creative writing abilities
- Perfect one of their essays and select a publishing target for it or develop a proposal for a book-length project

Texts and Reading Materials

The following is a list of texts we will be using in this class:

1. Root, Robert L., Jr. and Michael Steinberg. *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfictio*n. 6th edition. Boston: Pearson, 2012. Indicated as **FG** in daily syllabus.
2. Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola. 2nd edition. *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. Indicated as **TIS** in daily syllabus.
3. Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make this Stuff Up*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012. Indicated as **Gutkind** in daily syllabus.
4. A notebook to collect ideas, personal stories, in-class writing. You may also bring your laptop if you prefer to collect ideas on it.

Additional readings and resources will be posted in the Resources section of OWL-Space. The following are already posted.

"Crazy Little Think Called Memory" (a blog). http://brevity.wordpress.com/2009/01/09/crazy-little-thing-called-memory/
Kihlstrom, John F. "Memoir." http: //socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/memoir.htm.

Also, all readings and handouts from MLSC 617 (Spring 2012) are posted as well for ease of reference.

Evaluation Principles and Assignment Guidelines

I will judge the merits of your work in relation to your peers but also against a standard of excellence expected of students in a master's degree-level program at Rice University. I will follow these general grading principles:

1. I will evaluate each assignment using the criteria below:
   a. Effective structure, flow
      - Gets reader's attention (title, introduction, first few paragraphs)
      - Maintains momentum
      - Ends strongly
   b. Clear in writing and story
   c. Verisimilitude (sense of truth)
   d. Originality and creativity
   e. Adequacy of research methods when appropriate
   f. Effectiveness of style and tone and suitability for the topic
   g. Correct use of, or at least justifiable, grammar, punctuation, and spelling
   h. Formatting and appearance (including careful proofreading for typos, etc.)
2. My intention is to work with you to develop your creative writing abilities. If at any time, you have any other questions, please come see me.
3. I will use the following scale when awarding grades on your major assignments:

A+ = 98	B+ = 88	C+ = 78	D = 65
A = 95	B = 85	C = 75	F = 50
A- = 92	B- = 82	C- = 72	R = Rewrite*

*An "R" indicates that the assignment has potential but warrants revisions or rewriting. If you receive an "R," you may rewrite and resubmit the assignment to be reevaluated. Please turn in the original assignment when you turn in the rewritten work no later than a week from when the graded assignment was returned to you.

4. **Please follow the submission guidelines below and ensure your essays conform to the usage standards, formatting, and design guidelines for submitting creative works for publication:**
   a. Assignments should be submitted in a hard copy format (which means copies for everyone in the class) or placed in the OWL-Space Resources file designated for each essay. If you submit to OWL-Space, be careful that the electronic version will print in the format you intend.
   b. Your name should be on every page as a footer or header with the page number; for electronically submitted papers, use your name and the date as the file name.
   c. Use one inch margins all around, double spacing.
   d. You should follow MLA documentation formats whenever you use information from others.
5. **Please follow the Rice Honor Code for all work prepared for this course.** Assignments call on your own ideas and experience, but if you bring in information from others, please be careful to acknowledge all sources appropriately. Not doing so would be a violation of academic honesty policies and the Honor Code. Having someone else write your essays or substantially edit your writing is considered a violation of the Honor Code in this class; however, you may have someone read over your essays for clarity and slips in proofreading.

Assignments with Due Dates and Values

The table below includes the due date and value for each assignment.

Due Date	Assignments	Value
Jan 30*	Essay # 1 (3 to 5 pages) – Memoir	15%
Feb 20*	Essay # 2 (3 to 5 pages) – Memoir or other personal essay	20%
Mar 13	Exercises and in-class writings (shared in class throughout and then collected at the end)	20%
Mar 20	Publishable essay with plans or a book proposal with table of contents and sample chapters	20%
Throughout the semester	Class participation and attendance; contributions to discussions; feedback (oral and written) to peers.	25%

*Note: Those who sign up to have their essays workshopped on our first night of workshops for essays 1 (January 30) and essay 2 (February 20) will need to place their essays in OWL-Space by the Friday before or hand out copies in the class before to allow time for us to read them and provide feedback.

Daily Syllabus – Winter 2013

In the following daily syllabus, you will find the readings and exercises for each class meeting. Most nights we will discuss craft and example essays, but the focus throughout this course is your own writing.

Class	Dates	Topic	Assignment
1	**Jan 9**	Intro and sign-up for workshop Memoir and Memory	Introductions, overview, and discussion of the qualities of creative nonfiction; journals and exercises, writing habits, and possible uses of 617 portfolios. Sign up for nights to workshop your writing. **Read** the following: **FG:** Preface; Introduction; Jocelyn Bartkevicius, "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction"**;** Patricia Hampl, "Red Sky at Dawn" and "Memory and Imagination" **Gutkind** Part I – "What is Creative Nonfiction?" pp. 1-44 (For those who read *Keep It Real* in 617 last spring, just skim these pages to refresh your memory of what we discussed): . **TIS:** Chapter 7 "The Particular Challenges of Creative Nonfiction"
2	**Jan 16**	Memoir And Finding ideas	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **FG:**: Vivian Gornick, "On the Bus"; Michael Steinberg, "Chin Music," and "Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays" **TIS:** Introduction: Where to Begin Part I: Unearthing Your Material 1. "The Body of Memory," Exercises 1 or 3 and 2 of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5[1] 2. "Writing the Family," Exercise 1, 2, 3, or 4 3. "Writing the Physical World," Exercise 1, 2, or 3 **Gutkind:** pp. 55 -64 *OWL-Space:* Kihlstrom, "Memoir" and "Crazy Little Thing Called Memory"
3	**Jan 23**	Memoir And Reading Like a Writer	**Read** the following: **FG:** Valerie Due, "Lambing Midwife" and "Gestating Memory: Capturing Narrative Details in 'Lambing Midwife'"; Judith Ortiz Cofer, "Silent Dancing"; Mimi Schwartz, "My Father Always Said"; Maureen Stanton, "Zion" and "On Writing Zion" **Gutkind:** pp. 99 – 151, including "Difficult Decisions."

[1] The exercises from *Tell it Slant* are included at the back of this syllabus.

Class	Dates	Topic	Assignment
4	**Jan 30**	Immersion and other types of CNF	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **Gutkind:** "Selecting Subjects to Write About," pp. 61-88 **TIS:** 6 "Gathering the Threads of History," Exercise 1 or 2, or 1; 7 "Writing the Larger World," Exercise 1, 2, or 3, or 1 or 2; 8 "Using Research," Exercise 1 or 3. **Essay # 1 Workshop memoir essays or excerpts**
5	**Feb 6**	Personal Essays and other CNF	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **Gutkind:** pp. 151-186, including "Three Spheres" and "Yellow Taxi"; complete Exercises 12 and 13. **TIS:** 9. "The Personal Essay"; 10 "The Lyric Essay and Mixed Media"; 11 "Writing Online," Exercise 2, 6, 7, or 8. **Essay # 1 Workshop memoir essays or excerpts (continues)**
6	**Feb 13**	More personal essays and other types of CNF	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **FG:** Steven Harvey, "The Art of Self"; Carl H. Klaus, "Days into Essays: A Self for All Seasons"; Dagoberto Gilb, "Northeast Direct"; Meghan Daum, "On the Fringes of the Physical World" **Gutkind:** pp. 186-200, including excerpt from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and "Fixing Nemo" **Essay # 1 Workshop memoir essays or excerpts (continues)**
7	**Feb 20**	Personal Essay	**Read** the following: **FG:** Matt Farwell, "Welcome to Afghanistan"; Sherry Simpson, "Natural History, or What Happens When We're Not Looking"; Steven Church, "I'm Just Getting to the Disturbing Part" **Workshop of Essay # 2 starts**
8	**Feb 27**	Personal Essays	**Read** the following: FG: Mary Elizabeth Pope, "Teacher Training" and "Composing 'Teacher Training'"; Abigail Moore Allerding, "Home" and "Unwrapping Surprises in the Personal Essay" **Workshop of Essay # 2 continues**

Class	Dates	Topic	Assignment
9	**Mar 6**	Revising and Polishing	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **Gutkind:** From "The Story Determines the Research" through "First Lede/Read Lead; Clarity and Question Marks," "The Drawer Phase," to "Remember that Writing is Revision," pp. 200 – 235; Exercises 15, 16, &18. **TIS:** 13 "The Basics of Good Writing in Any Form," Exercises 1, 5, 6, & 7; 14 "The Writing Process and Revision," Exercise 3 **Workshop of Essay # 2 continues**
10	**Mar 13**	Publishing And Exercise highlights	**Read** the following and complete exercises: **FG:** Shari Caudron, "Befriending Barbie"; Emily Chase, "Warping Time With Montaigne"; "Notes from a Journey Toward 'Warping Time'"; John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens" **TIS** 15 "The Writing Group"; 16 "Publication" Bring all of your completed exercises and be prepared to share a couple of them with the class. You may simply read what you have written but having copies for us would make it easier for us to follow you and provide feedback.
11	**Mar 20**	Final class	Final essay or proposal due. Discussion and reading from submitted essay and discussion of proposals. Celebration

Reminders on the Workshop Format

The purpose of a workshop is to give and receive constructive, thoughtful, and rigorous feedback about your work from your peers. It is essential that you come to class prepared to discuss your peers' work, so please read their work carefully and come with specific feedback.

The two most important guidelines to remember in workshopping are (1) respond to your peers as you would want them to respond to you (be honest, constructive, and respectful), and (2) give specific examples from the work to support your points.

You may use the following questions to guide your feedback for your peers:

1. What has the writer done well?
2. What do you remember most? Why?
3. Why do you suppose the piece begins and ends where it does?
4. What is the structure of the piece and does it work? Is the thought pattern or argument or flow clear and logical? What is the narrative arc?
5. Are transitions between paragraphs and ideas clear?
6. How does the place or setting add to the piece?
7. How is the language? Style? Tone? Sentence rhythm?
8. Does the dialogue (if any) ring true?
9. Is the audience clear?
10. How has the writer employed strategies we've studied in class?
11. How is character established?
12. Do you see evidence of research (if appropriate)? Do the facts seem real, true to life?
13. Overall, how well does this piece work as a creative nonfiction essay?

You are not limited to these questions; you may discuss other creative writing topics relevant to the particular essay if you wish.

In addition to writing comments in the margins of workshopped essays for your peers, you should also type an overall critique that you will (1) give to your fellow student being workshopped **after** we have discussed their essay in class **and** (2) e-mail to me no later than 2 hours ***before*** class.

Also, please review the Guidelines for Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshops, and if you have not read or have forgotten Levine's "Critique Your Way to Better Writing" from MLSC 617, I suggest you review it. Again, critiquing other writers teaches you to be a better writer.

Essay Assignments

We will workshop essays 1 and 2 below, so you will need to provide copies to your classmates in time for them to read your essay before the class in which it is to be workshopped. Please remember to place your name on each page, number your pages, include the word count on the first page, allow 1-inch margins, and double space the entire essay.

Essay #1 –Memoir

Using the prompts #1 or 3 of the Try It exercises, pp. 12 -13 (see below in exercises), develop a memoir essay of 3 to 5 pages.

Or

#1, p. 104 - Write a short piece of memoir using a particular event, as E.B. White does in "Afternoon of an American Boy." Write quickly and then examine the piece in light of the above distinctions between the intimate and the universal. Where do you speak as though the reader is a friend, listening at your side? Do you need to reveal more of yourself, of your feelings, as White discloses his embarrassment at his inability to dance? And where is the universality of your experience? You may want to trade with a partner to uncover the answers to these questions.

Essay #2 – Personal, Immersion, or other CNF Essay

Write a personal or other type of CNF essay. You may use one of the following prompts to get you started.

1. Write a journalistic story, perhaps about a colorful place nearby or an event in your community (a protest? a festival?) that uses reportorial style to capture the story but also includes your own presence as a character. Use literary devices to describe the people you see; use metaphor to paint their lives. Take advantage of literary devices, while respecting the factuality of journalism.
2. Write a sketch of a person or a place. Focus on keeping your work vivid and simple—a language portrait. Think of it as being intended for someone who cannot meet this person or visit this area. And remember your personal essayist's challenge to be both intimate and universal—help us see the smallest details, like the buttons on a coat or ashtrays on a table—while using description that shows how this person or place fits with places or people generally.
3. Write an essay titled "On_____." Fill in the blank yourself and use the title as a way to explore an abstract concept in a personal and concrete way.
4. Use the immersion prompt in Chapter 8 of TIS (#3 below).

Final Project: Writing to Publish or Writing a Book Proposal

For your final assignment in MLSC 624, you are to select one of the following two options:

Option 1: Submit an Essay for Publication

For this option, you are to take one of the essays you wrote for MLSC 617 or for this class or perhaps a new one based on the writing exercises from TIS, revise it for publication, and determine your plans for submitting it. Please turn in the following to me:

- The finished essay correctly formatted for publication (be sure to include word count and your name)
- A submission plan, including the following: (1) list of three to five possible targets for publication and their submission requirements, (2) your reasons for selecting these publications, (3) your schedule for submitting the work.

Option 2: Draft a Book Proposal

For this option, you are to develop a book proposal. Since each type of book and most agents or publishers (you should decide which is more appropriate for you) have their own expectations of what a proposal should contain, the specific content of each will differ some. However, most guides to writing a nonfiction book proposal will tell you to include the following:

1. Brief overview: The objective of the overview is to provide 3 to 5 pages to get an agent or publisher interested by summarizing what your book is about. You can think of this as your elevator speech.
2. Preliminary table of contents
3. Sample chapter(s)
4. Positioning of your book (what genre, topic area, and publications it most resembles)
5. Your writing biography (at a minimum why you are qualified to write this book)

In addition, I would also like to see your query letter and your plans for submission (to whom and when), so please include both with your proposal.

The following from SheWrites.com provides a good overview of a book proposal:

> Writing a nonfiction book proposal is critical to getting a nonfiction book deal. Your book proposal is a tool. The work it does is invaluable in that it helps your editor and agent sell your work.
>
> The chain of events goes like this: You send your proposal to an agent, who, upon signing you, uses that proposal to shop your book to an editor. Your editor uses that proposal to sell your book to their Editorial Board. Once the publisher buys your book, your proposal still has more life in it! It's used by the marketing department to refine your positioning in the marketplace and for jacket and catalog copy. It's used again by your editor to develop her pitch to the sales team, who in turn uses the same concepts and

ideas to pitch your book to the bookseller and/or accounts who are responsible for buying your book into the marketplace.

All of this is riding on the back of your proposal. It's important not just to take it seriously. If you want to get a book deal, you have to nail it. That means following a formula. You do not need to---and shouldn't, in fact---reinvent the wheel here. . . .

Remember to think of your proposal as a selling tool. It showcases how and why your book will sell, and how and why you're the author to make this happen. As important as the writing is, don't lose sight of this particular orientation to your proposal!

Source: http://www.shewrites.com/profiles/blogs/how-to-write-a-winning-nonfiction-book-proposal

Other online sources with good information are as follows:

http://www.stirrup-queens.com/2010/06/diy-mfa-how-to-write-a-non-fiction-book-proposal-part-three/

http://www.rachellegardner.com/2011/07/how-to-write-a-book-proposal/

http://writerssherpablog.com/write-a-book/nonfiction-book-proposal-do-you-need-to-write-one-to-get-your-book-published/

Tell It Slant Writing Exercises

The MLSC 624 writing exercises are designed to help you generate ideas, begin new pieces, and/or revise existing work. You should select one prompt from each chapter unless otherwise specified and follow the instructions in the prompt (for most, you are asked to brainstorm or do free writing). You may hand write or type your responses. Periodically, I will call on you to read what you have written to the class. Also, I will review your responses a couple of times during the semester, so please keep them organized either in a notebook or in your journal so that you can hand them in to me.

I see these responses as journal entries or exercises and, therefore, will not award grades on these as individual pieces. Instead, I will give you a grade for the overall effort. I am not looking for finished products but that you have spent the time necessary to display your thinking and creativity about the subject.

Chapter 1 The Body of Memory

Do 1 or 3 below:

1. **The Earliest Memory**
   Write a scene of a very early, vivid memory. What calls out for further examination? Are you realistic? What are the odd details, the ones that don't seem to fit with other people's versions of the story? What in this scene seems to matter to you? Should it? What are you leaving out? If you get stuck, keep repeating the phrase "I remember" to start off your sentences; allow this rhythm to take you further than you thought you could go.

Variation I: Do you have an ideal "earliest memory"? Write this out, and see how your imagination and your memory intersect or diverge. Is there an essay in the process of memory itself?

Variation II: Talk with family members about *their* memories of the time you pinpoint as your first memory. How do they corroborate or deny your own memory? How can you create a "collaborative" memory that includes their versions of the events? How does this memory enact a family "myth"? Is there an essay about the way these divergent accounts work together?

Or

3. **The First Time**

How many different "firsts" can you remember in your life? The first meal you remember enjoying, the first smell you remember wanting to smell again, the first day of school, the first book you remember reading by yourself, the first album you ever bought, the first time you drove a car, the first kiss, the first time you were touched in a sexual way? How does your memory of these "First" events color your perception of yourself? What kinds of metaphors do they generate for your life story?

The Five Senses of Memory. Do **at least two** of the following five senses exercises:

1. *Smell.* Gather articles that you know carry some smell that is evocative for you. One by one, smell them deeply, then write the images that arise in your mind. Write quickly, allowing the smell to trigger other sensory associations.
2. *Taste.* Try to remember the first meal you consciously tasted and enjoyed. Describe this meal in detail; make yourself hungry with these details. Who ate this meal with you? If you can't remember any such meal, imagine one.
3. *Touch.* Find an object that you consider a "talisman," something you either carry with you, or keep in a special place in your home. Hold this object in your hand, with your eyes closed, and feel all its textures. Begin to write, using this tactile description to trigger memories, scenes, metaphors.
4. *Sound.* Try recreating a scene from your childhood using *only* the sense of hearing. What music is playing in the background? Whose voice is on the radio? How loud is the sound of traffic? What do the trees sound like in the wind? Are there insects, birds, animals? A hum from a factory? Rain, rivers, the lapping of a lake? What is the quality of the silence? Try to pick out as many ambient sounds as you can, then begin to amplify those sounds you think have the most metaphorical significance. What kind of emotional tone do these sounds give to the piece?

   OR

   Put on a piece of music that you strongly associate with a certain era of your life. Using this music as a soundtrack, zero in on a particular scene that arises in your mind. Try writing the scene *without mentioning the music at all*, but convey through your word choices and imagery and sentence structure the essence of this music's rhythm, its beat. *Or* Do the same thing, but this time use fragments of the lyrics as "scaffolding" for the essay. Give us a few lines, then write part of the memory those lines evoke in you. Give us a few more, and continue with the memory, so that the song plays throughout the entire piece.
5. *Sight.* Using a photograph of yourself, a relative, or a friend, describe every detail of the scene. Then focus in on one object or detail that seems unexpected to you in some way. How does this detail trigger specific memories? Also, imagine what occurred just before and just after this photograph was taken; what is left outside the frame? For instance, write an essay with a title like: "After (Before) My Father Is Photographed on the U.S.S. Constitution" (insert whatever subject is appropriate for the photographs you've chosen).

Chapter 2 Writing the Family

Do **one** of the following:

1. Begin an essay by imagining the life of someone close to you—a family member, a friend, a mentor—before you knew them. Use your imagination coupled with your experience of this person. Use any clues they may exist: objects from the past, documents, photographs, etc. to form a portrait of this person before you were in the picture. Then complete the essay by contrasting this portrait with the person you know today. How are they different or similar?
2. Almost all families have some mythic story about someone meeting a famous person. Try to recreate a relative's encounter with a celebrity.
3. Create a picture of your family based on some simple gesture: the way they sigh, they laugh, they cry, they kiss. Begin with a vivid, original description of this gesture, then describe your father, your mother, yourself, or any other family members. Try to see how examining these small things reveal larger details about the family.
4. Write a list of the things you would "never" write about. What are the silences that can't be broken? Begin each sentence with "I would never write about...." or "I am slow to write about...." See if this backward maneuver might actually lead you into scenes, details and memories you might be able to handle in a short essay.

Chapter 3 Taking Place: Writing the Physical World

Do **one** of the following:

1. Isolate a single room or outdoor place that, to you, forms the most essential place of childhood. Write down every element of the place you can remember, quickly, with as much detail as possible. What were the patterns of the things you see? Are they old or new? What odd details do you remember (e.g., a gargoyle-shaped knot in the wood, a gray rug with a dark stain the shape of Brazil, etc.)? Now fill in an emotional tone for each detail: did the wallpaper make you feel safe, or frightened? What were your favorite things in this place to look at? Your least favorite? Why? What felt "yours" and what felt other? *Assemble these specifics into an essay about the emotional landscape of your childhood, moving about the room, letting your essay function as an emotional "camera."
2. Examine a piece of your writing and scrutinize place as character. Is your setting a developed character? What kind of character is it: positive, nurturing, menacing, indifferent? Imagine the setting of a scene as a silent character, shaping and nuancing the action surrounding it. Or Write a biography of a place. Choose a street, a forest, an airport (possibly look at Pico Iyer's essay on the Los Angeles airport, "Where Worlds Collide"), a shopping center, anyplace that has character to you, whether positive or negative. Write a profile, a "character study," of that environment. This may lead to a developed essay, like Iyer's; in any event, it's a very useful exercise in characterizing a place.
3. If you have a travel diary or journal, go back to it now and pull out sections that give highly sensory descriptions of place: the feel of the air, the taste of the food, the sounds, the smells. Type these out in separate sections, then arrange them on a table, seeing if you can find a common theme that may bind an essay together. What can you construe as the greater purpose for your travels? How can you incorporate that purpose into your travel writing? What is the one image that will emerge for metaphorical significance?

Chapter 6 Gathering the Threads of History

Do **one** of the following or all of "Dating a significant event":

1. What event of national or world importance do you remember most clearly? How did you hear of it, and what did you hear? What were other people around you doing? What was going on in your own life that this event bounced off of, resonated with, formed a strange contrast to? Use all of your senses to recreate this memory.
2. What aspects of your life do people around you consistently find most interesting? What questions do they ask you? What can you tell them that satisfies/dissatisfies them?

Or

Dating a Significant Event

1. Write a description of an event you consider critical in your life. It should date from at least a few years in your past, and can be from childhood. As in most writing exercises, write quickly and do not censor yourself. Be as specific and detailed as possible, using your senses: if you're sitting on a throw rug in the living room of your childhood, describe as much as you can the weave of the rug, the room, the scents in your childhood home, people, the drone of the television, if you kept it on.

   Now use a list of chronologies, possibly a simple one printed from an Internet site like www.historychannel.com, to date your experience with a corresponding national or world event. Don't worry if you feel you weren't thinking about the event at the time; your first impulses on that question aren't generally accurate, as you wouldn't so much have been thinking about something like the Vietnam War, for example, as living in the atmosphere it created. It also is not necessary for a successful essay that the larger news formed part of your consciousness; your obliviousness to it may be part of what makes the essay fascinating.

   Once you find a historical corollary, write as many connections, real or metaphoric, as you can. Remember how rich the field of connections can be in creative nonfiction—literal, linguistic, metaphoric, atmospheric. Don't feel the need to justify to yourself immediately why something feels important. If your gut tells you it's important, then surely it is. You write—we all do--to find out what these connections are, to thread yourself into the intricate webbing of human existence.

Chapter 7 Writing the Larger World

Do **one** of the following:

1. Identify an area of expertise you have. Detail that work, as Richard Selzer does so carefully in "The Knife." Examine your role and the larger significance of it, as well as the role this specialized activity plays in human culture and your own life. Think of how it makes you feel, what aspect of your humanity it accentuates.
2. Examine a sport in terms of the imagery of its body movements, dress, rituals and rules. Do any of these seem to defy our stereotypes of this sport? What social significance can you draw from what you see? How do you connect to this sport emotionally?
3. Think of a way in which a sport has had significance in your own life, or that of someone close to you. Are there ways in which this personal experience and the sport, or a sports player's career, have run parallel? How? Can you think of a time when a sporting event had an emotional impact on an important event in your own life?

Or **one** of the following:

1. Freewrite a list of things you deal with on a daily basis and don't think about very much. Don't be choosy; jot down whatever pops into your head: paper, fluorescent lighting, mosquitoes, slugs, flush toilets. Then select one item from your list. What are the larger metaphysical (that is, dealing with the properties of the universe at large) connotations of your item? Look at it if you can. Let's say you have chosen a piece of white paper. What does your paper suggest? What are the implications of its smoothness and whiteness? Of writing on pressed trees? Of writing within a square frame? Don't censor yourself but simply go with your impulses. Be weird. Be funny. Find the universe in the particular "grain of sand" in front of you.
2. Next, uncover a few facts about your item. They may be things you already know, or that classmates or group members can tell you or that you can look up quickly on the Internet. Then do a second freewrite, focusing on details about your item that feel interesting or suggestive. How is paper made? What might it mean to paper that we now have so much writing in cyberspace? Again, don't censor yourself. Feel free to be silly, and to be broad.

Chapter 8 Using Research to Expand Your Perspective

Do **one** of the following:

1. Pull out an essay you've been working on, one that has promise but doesn't feel quite finished yet. Make a list of facts that inform this piece—none of these facts needs to be present in the work but implied, either through location, time, action, or characters. Here's a sample opening paragraph, and the list it generates.

   It is 1963 and I am watching, for what seems like the hundredth time, Lee Harvey Oswald collapse as he is shot by Jack Ruby. I am wearing my Winnie the Pooh pajamas and listening to the ice clink in my mother's glass as she drinks another gin in the kitchen. I've told her I'm watching Rocky & Bullwinkle but by this time of night she's too far gone to pay attention.

   Here's a list of possible research areas:
   —Kennedy assassination: political climate of the time? Bay of Pigs?
   —Media in the early 60s.
   —Post-war Midwest (unstated in the opening, but this is the location).
   —Alcoholism, particularly during this period. What was the medical view of alcoholism? The social view? How was alcohol portrayed in the media of the time?

   Going down the list, the author decides that number 4, alcoholism, is the most promising avenue for further study. She begins by looking at advertisements and films from the period, seeing how alcohol is portrayed: as an everyday diversion, the province of sophisticates and James Bond-types. She explores medical textbooks dating from the 1960s to probe how alcohol dependence was viewed then: she finds it a much more character-driven view, less a disease model, than today. Finally, she browses Alcoholics Anonymous literature to see how a sense of the disease of alcoholism has evolved.

   The final step is highlighting information worth using and then working it into the author's story without a change of voice: it's important not to sound textbook-y, as if another author has come in to serve as newscaster. Compare two moves this author could make next, given below:

In 1963, more than half of Americans, current experts agree, use alcohol to excess, and 75% of films show characters drinking alcoholic drinks.

Or:

Everybody is in love with James Bond this year, who drinks martini after martini in his movies without any change in behavior. James Bond has made "shaken, not stirred" a mantra for this martini-smitten culture. My mother simply eliminates the vermouth.

What began as a delicate, personal essay can't afford to switch into the sociological language of the first example, not to mention the fact that its dry tone is distancing and hard to care about. The second attempt contains a real detail of the period that ties intimately to the author's story, a detail that's engaging and sets the mother within the context of acceptable social behavior of the time. Nevertheless, it's a detail the author would not have found without a little digging.

Or

3. Chances are you've already had at least one terrific immersion experience, even if you didn't call it that: maybe it was the wedding you attended where the bride and groom were Goths who married in black robes with white talcum on their faces. Maybe it was the time your uncle dragged you along to a meeting of the local Elks Club. Fascinating immersion experiences exist all over. Do you live near a hospital? A casino? A group of Wiccans? A Society for Creative Anachronism? Ask them if they would mind you observing them a while for an essay. Keep notes, use a tape recorder, or both.

   Decide, before you begin your immersion experience, how you see your role. Will you take the approach of Didion and acknowledge your presence in the events you write about, or, like Lee Gutkind, try to keep yourself out of the narrative? Adjust your presence accordingly.

Chapter 11 Writing Online: Hypertext and Social Media

Do **one** of the following:

2. Use an online medium you are familiar with, such as Facebook, Twitter, or MapQuest, to compose an essay.
6. Spend some time reading blogs on a topic that's close to your heart. Take note of the voices that attract you, those that repel you, and those that leave you neutral. Write up a list of those attributes, and then see how you might learn from them for your own writing—on a blog or otherwise.
7. Start a blog with the idea of a finite number of entries: "Fifty Ways" or "Twenty-Five Views of" or Thirty Considerations," etc. Commit to posting at least once a week, no matter what.
8. If you already have a blog, research how you might start attracting more traffic to it. Read one of the tips websites and commit to improving the quality and variety of the blog posts.

Chapter 13 The Basics of Good Writing in Any Form

Do all **four** of the following:

1. Go through a piece of your writing and find a passage of summary that could, or maybe even should, be in scene. Don't fret right now about whether scene is absolutely necessary here: the point is to develop the skill of automatically asking yourself whether that option will help you. Answering those basic questions of fiction—who, what, when, where, why—rewrite the passage as a scene.

   Sometimes we stymie ourselves by imaging we must remember everything or we can't describe *anything*. So work with what you remember. You may forget the look of a room but remember the sound or smell of it. . . . Or create a bridge, such as writing a few sentences about how this is what a dialogue sounds like in your memory as you try to re-create it, giving yourself permission to fill in what you don't remember word for word. Remember that almost any device for reconstruction is fine, as long as you let readers in on what you're doing.

5. Write a page or two of dialogue. Practice for this by using your notebook to record snippets of speech: exchanges with classmates, friends, spouses, parents. Pay attention to the syntax of speech. How much is grammatically correct or incorrect? How much slang or dialect appears in different speakers' voices? When you feel ready, write a page or two of typical dialogue—you can record it and write it down, or try to recreate it—with someone fairly close to you. Do the same partner swap with this dialogue you did with characterization, and see how much of the person you're describing comes through in his or her voice.

6. The only way to fully understand point of view is to experiment with it. Pull out an earlier essay of yours, or write a simple paragraph about some subject you've thought about as a likely one. Then recast the point of view, from first to second or third. Force yourself to keep going through at least one paragraph; don't look at the clunkiness of a sentence like *For five years you lived in Alaska* and give up. Push through, and open yourself up to moments when the point of view works, when you feel interesting possibilities arise (you can also refer to the "How To" section of the "Lyric Essay" chapter). Be sensitive to the nuances of placing the reader so squarely in your shoes in second person, of distancing yourself from your own life, as you must using third person. Examine the essay possibilities that arise out of each change: the alienation of third person, the direct implication of the reader in second person.

   Traditionally, point-of-view *shifting*—moving from the narrative position of one character to another within a piece—has been a problem area for fiction writers. Unintentional shifting is a common error for young writers; masterful shifts can make a story, as in Flannery O'Connor's famous shift to the Misfit's point of view at the end of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." As nonfiction expands its reach, we see point of view shifting in this genre as well. Richard Selzer does it, as we have shown earlier in this chapter. See if such a switch can enrich a piece of your enrich a piece of your own writing.

7. Do a quick diagnostic of two to three paragraphs of your own prose (less might not be representative enough). How long do your sentences tend to be? How do you structure them? Do you vary voices, or speech acts, such as questioning, stating and commanding, or do you simply use the declarative or simple statement voice? Challenge yourself to approach a piece of prose in a way you haven't in the past—more short sentences or sentence fragments, perhaps, or more shifts in voice. See how this change alters your work, and opens up the possibilities of the essay.

Chapter 14 The Writing Process and Revision

Do the following exercise (turn in the essay—however rough—and your answers to the questions):

3. Take out a piece you wrote at least a month ago. Read it aloud, either to yourself or to a kind audience. Make note of the paragraphs that feel full and rich and those that are not as strong. Are there any areas that surprise you? What is the essay really about? What can be cut out and saved for another time? What needs to be included that was left out at first?

Here are some specific questions to ask yourself as you go about the global revision process:

- Is there one image that can be used as a cohesive thread throughout the piece? How can you amplify this image and transform it from beginning to end?
- Have you chosen the most effective point of view for telling the story? What happens if you experiment with third person? Second person?
- Look closely at the beginning paragraph of your essay. Do you begin in a way that draws the reader in? Often the first few paragraphs of a rough draft act as "clearing the throat." Is the true beginning really a few pages in?
- Look closely at the end of the essay. Do you end in a way that leaves the reader with a compelling image? Often it's tempting to "sum up" the essay in a way that can be wholly unsatisfying to the reader. Can you end on an image rather than an idea?
- How do the beginning and ending paragraphs mirror or echo one another? The first and last paragraphs act as a "frame" for the piece as a whole. They are, in a way, the most important places in the essay, because they determine everything that happens in between. If you make an effort to connect them in some way—repeating a key image from the beginning, bringing back on stage the major players for a final bow—you will find a stunning finish to the piece.

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Documented Disabilities: Please speak with your instructor if you have a documented disability that will impact your work in this class. All discussions will remain confidential. Students should also contact the Disability Support Services Office in the Allen Center.